

Narrowing the Achievement Gap in a Resegregated Urban School District: Trends in Standards of Learning Test Scores

Vivian W. Ikpa
Temple University

Abstract

As the nation celebrates the 50th Anniversary of the 1954 Brown Decision, it is important to examine the achievement gap between children attending resegregated public schools and their counterparts attending integrated schools. The achievement gap is directly impacted by four specific interdependent types of deficits: moral, human capital, functional and agency. These deficits guide the analysis of trends in the reading and writing achievement gaps between resegregated and desegregated schools in the Norfolk School District. The results of the Virginia *Standards of Learning* for 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002 were computed. The findings suggest that the district has narrowed the gap significantly between the resegregated and desegregated schools.

Introduction

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court declared in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that maintaining separate and equal facilities for African Americans and European Americans in interstate transportation was unconstitutional. The high court also declared that separating the two races did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. This 1896 “separate but equal doctrine” was applied to just about every facet of American life. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* Decision was utilized to justify separating African American and European Americans in public schools. In the 1954 Brown Decision, the United States Supreme Court declared that “the separate but equal” education for African Americans and European Americans was unconstitutional. One day after this landmark decision was handed down, Thurgood Marshall, contended that segregated schools would be eliminated by the end of the decade. Unfortunately, when United States Supreme Court Justice died almost four decades later, the schools were still segregated. As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown Decision, the schools are still segregated. In 1954, only 10 percent of public school students were minority group members. Today the public school segregation index continues to grow. (Orfield, 2001) Since the mid-1970’s, the American public schools have become more segregated and are regressing to a pre-Brown pattern of segregation (Orfield, 2001) Given these alarming statistics, it is important to revisit trends in the racial/ethnic achievement gap in the nations public schools. This paper seeks to describe the trends in the achievement gap between resegregated and integrated schools in an urban school district.

National Trends in the Achievement Gap

The reading achievement gap between European Americans and African American students has been researched extensively by social scientists. It has been predicted that by the year 2010, almost 34 percent of the students attending public schools will be African American and Hispanic (Braverman, 2001). Researchers also contend that by 2015, European American students will be twice as likely as African Americans and three times as likely as Hispanic students to complete college (Johnston and Viadero, 2000).

In 1971, the average reading score for 17 year old African Americans was 239 as compared to 295 for 17 year old European American students. When compared to 13 year old European American students performed 32 points lower. According to data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2000), the reading achievement test scores of eighth graders increased between 1992 and 1998. Although gains were evident for students in grade eight, a decline was evident for students in grades four and twelve. A more extensive analysis of data revealed that females performed better than their male counterparts at grades four, eight and twelve. It was also interesting to note that the reading test scores of males actually increased between 1992-1998.

Data from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated that the vast majority of students in grades four eight and twelve writing skills were at the Basic level. The study found that only 25 percent of these students were at the Proficiency level and approximately 1 percent was able to write at the Advanced level (NAEP, 1999). Further analysis of these data revealed that European American students were more likely to perform at the Advanced level and less likely to perform at the Basic level than their African American counterparts. The findings also suggested that when writing was emphasized by teachers or someone within the home, students performed better on writing tests (NCES,2000).

Conceptualizing the Achievement Gap

The achievement gap must be conceptualized within the sociopolitical context in which it exists. There are numerous structural deficits that contribute to the disparity in academic performance between African American and European American students. Schools are a part of an interdependent complex system of social institutions. Other institutions such as the polity, religious entities and health care influence both educational inputs and outputs. One must realize that when disparities exist in inputs such as funding, individual characteristics and school characteristics, the outputs as measured by standardized tests will result in knowledge gaps. Deficits serve to widen the achievement gap between minority and majority students. It is my contention that the achievement gap is impacted by four specific deficits: moral, human capital, functional and agency.

The Moral Deficit

As shown in figure 1, the achievement gap is influenced by four types of deficits: Moral, Human capital, Functional and Expressive. A moral deficit occurs when the state develops policies that do not reflect the views or interests of groups impacted by the decisions. There is no one optimal policy that will please all individuals; however, policymakers have a moral obligation to consider the costs and benefits to all groups affected by the policy. Additionally, the impact of policy decisions on human capital must also be considered. In essence public policies are frequently developed and implemented in linear, efficiency model driven context. This context frequently serves the interests of a conservative political agenda. Schools provide the framework for indoctrinating individuals in the political ideology reflected in the capitalistic structure (Bowles and Gintis). The *No Child Left Behind Act* reflects the conservative political agenda of the Bush II administration. High stakes testing has received the attention in this policy at the expense of other inputs that directly impact student achievement. If the state is committed to narrowing the achievement gap between African American and European American children, it must first address the moral deficit among policymakers by correctly identifying the problem.

It is my contention that there are other dimensions of the achievement gap that must be addressed by the polity before one gives a student a pencil, a chair and an examination booklet..

In addressing the achievement gap, policymakers should consider the impact of school resegregation on the academic achievement of minority and disadvantaged students. As Jencks and Phillips (1998) noted, school desegregation raises African American reading scores. It should also be noted that during the period from 1970 – 1988, the achievement gap between African Americans and European Americans declined by 50%. The gap remained relatively constant in the 1990s; however, it began to widen in reading and mathematics for 13 and 17 year old African Americans (Haycock, 2002). As the federal government abandoned its moral and legal commitment to the 1954 *Brown Decision*, the schools resegregated and the achievement gap began to widen. The interests of the state became more important than the interests of parents, African American children and society. These actions created a moral deficit which suggests that the interests of minority and economically marginalized groups are secondary to the dominant power.

The Human Capital Deficit

Human capital is the knowledge, information skills, concepts, ideas, and physical and emotional soundness of individuals (Becker 2002). According to Becker, the United States invests 70 percent of its total capital in human capital. One could argue that the achievement gap reflects a deficit in the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to function in the information processing age. The economic strength of a nation is directly correlated with the skills and knowledge acquired by members of society. These skills, concepts, and ideas are primarily transmitted by the school. The computer age has redefined knowledge bases and created specialized fields of knowledge. If African American children continue to perform poorly on reading and writing measures, the achievement gap will be reflected in a human capital deficit which will limit their knowledge as well as their economic stability. In essence, the achievement gap serves to limit the life chances of under skilled individuals. As Viadero and Johnston (2000) stated, as the complexity of jobs increases, the level of technical knowledge must also increase. The researchers are warning the polity, the school, the family and the individual that unless society implements strategies to narrow the gap, a crisis is inevitable (Viadero and Johnson 2000).

The Functional Deficit

The function deficit refers to the family's ability to provide the basic needs of the child. It encompasses Maslow's deficit needs: Psychological needs; safety and security needs; love and belonging needs; esteem needs. According to Maslow (1968), these basic needs are essential to survival. It is my contention that if these needs are not met within the family context, the individual is not fully functional and therefore not prepared for the high stakes testing as mandated by the polity. Additionally the functional deficit negatively impacts the health and well-being of the child and contributes to the human capital deficit. A child who is concerned about food, clothing, shelter and/or psychological well being is less likely to perform as well on high stakes testing as his more functionally prepared counterpart.

The Agency Deficit

The Agency Gap results from the lack of collective support from the African American community. Individuals within the community have a collective responsibility for the education of African American children. The church, home, business, health care providers are all responsible for providing the needed social capital to assist in increasing the human capital of children. The polity, school, home and community agencies are interdependent entities and each has an impact on the achievement gap between African American and European American students.

Purpose of Study

The 1986 Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals decision in Riddick v. School Board City of Norfolk gave the school district the legal sanction to eliminate cross town busing for integration. As a result of this decision, ten resegregated all African American elementary schools were created. These ten schools have been resegregated for almost 18 years. This ruling has left many African American students in racially isolated schools. It is my contention that these resegregated schools are a result of a moral deficit among the city policymakers. These students have been economically, socially and racially isolated for more almost two decades. The moral, human capital, functional and agency deficits have contributed to achievement gap between resegregated and desegregated schools in the district. The purpose of this study is to describe the reading and writing achievement gap between segregated and desegregated schools.

Research Questions:

The specific research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the trends in the english achievement gap between European American and African American students in the Norfolk Public Schoools?
2. What are the trends in the Writing achievement gap between European American And African American students in the Norfolk public Schools?

Methodology

This study describes the impact of resegregation on the reading and writing achievvment gap between European American and African American students. Data were collecetd from the 1998-2002 Virginia Standards of Learning Test (SOL). The average reading and writing scores for grade five students were collected per school.

The schools thirty four elementary schools in this study were divided into 4 categories based upon the percent of European Americans in each school:

Category 1.....more than 50 European American
Category 2.....35 – 49% European American
Category 3.....20-34% European American
Category 4.....0- 19% European American

The trends in the achievement gap were analyzed for a five year period.

Instrument

In an effort to improve academic performance for all students, the state of Virginia developed and implemented a four phase program, a reform program. This state mandated reform plan placed emphasis on performance standards and held the local school districts accountable for student outcomes. This program became known as the *Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL)*. The English and writing scores on the 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002 *SOL* were analyzed for each of the 34 elementary schools.

Findings

Analysis of the *Standards of Learning* reading scores indicated that performance improved for each school in all four school categories between 1998 and 2002 (Figure 2). In 1998, category 3 and 4 schools performed below the mean. However, category four schools scored below the grade five district mean for all five years. The findings suggested that as the level of desegregation increases, test scores also increase. It is interesting to note that the scores decreased slightly for students attending category 1 and 2 schools in 2000 and increased marginally for category 3 and 4 schools. The reading gap between the most desegregated schools (Figure 3) and the most segregated schools narrowed from 33.75 points in 1998 to 17.62 in 2002. The trends indicate that the resegregated schools are narrowing the reading achievement gap between their more integrated counterparts.

Findings also indicated continuous improving in writing for all school categories (Figure 4). The data revealed a decline in performance for category 3 and 4 schools in 2002. In 1998, Category 4 schools performed below the grade 5 mean on the writing test. The resegregated schools (category 4) continued to perform slightly below the mean during the following four years. Once again, the trends in writing performance suggested that as the level of segregation increases, the writing test scores decrease. However, in 2000 and 2001, category 3 schools performed better than category 1 schools. As shown in figure 5, the writing achievement gap between the most desegregated schools and the most segregated schools declined by about 4 points from 1998 to 1999, increased slightly in 2000. The scores declined by 6 points in 2001 and increased by 3 points in 2002. As is the case in reading, the writing achievement gap between racially isolated schools in Norfolk and their desegregated counterparts is narrowing.

Discussion

Results of the *Virginia Standards of Learning Test* indicated that the Norfolk Public Schools district has been successful in narrowing the reading and writing achievement gaps between desegregated schools and their more segregated counterparts. These trends are encouraging and should be investigated more extensively. There are specifics relevant to instructional leadership that may assist other school districts in addressing academic performance. Perhaps the district's success can be directly correlated with the dimensions of the achievement gap as discussed earlier. The emphasis on human capital in terms of making teachers and students accountable for specific knowledge, skills and concepts are central components of *Virginia's Standards of Learning program*. It appears that this district has addressed the human capital deficit component quite well. The findings from this study clearly indicate that there is still a human capital deficit within the resegregated schools. Analysis of trends show that these schools are lagging behind their desegregated counterparts. Additionally, the moral deficit in terms of the polity's decision to dismantle school desegregation plans in the city cannot be overlooked. This policy decision has narrowed the accessibility to equal

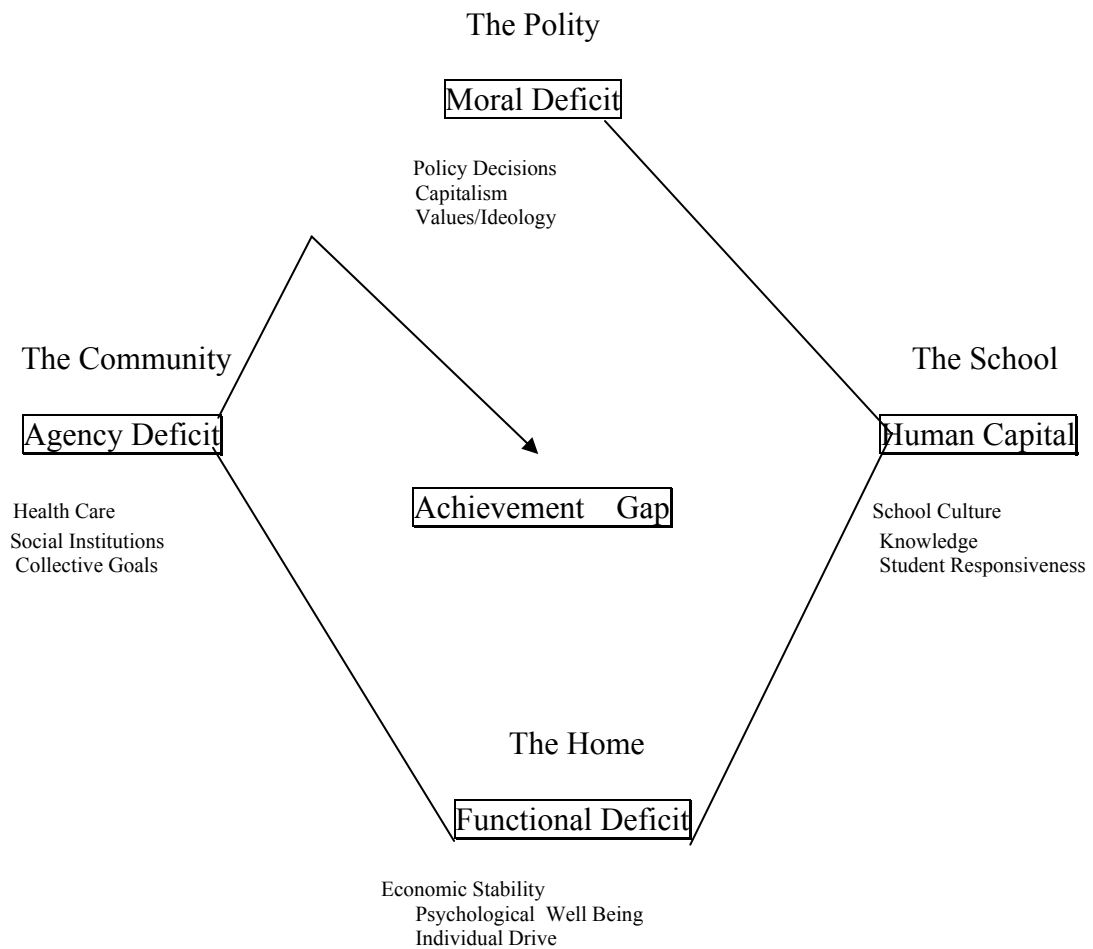
opportunities that may contribute to the functional deficit. Finally, every member of the African American community has a responsibility to its children and must utilize community resources to address the agency deficits associated with the dimensions of the achievement gap. If there is no shared sense of community among African Americans, the gap will grow.

References

- Brown v. Topeka, Kansas Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483; 74S. Ct. 686; 1954.
- Becker, G. (2002) "Human Capital refer to Knowledg, information Ideas, Skills, and Health of Individvals in Education-Twenty-First Century. Lazear, E.P. ed. Hoover Instution Press.
- Bowels, S. ande Gintis H. (1988) "Contradition and Contradiction and Reporduction in Eductional Theory ed. Mike Cole. London: The Falmer Press, 23.
- Braverman G. (2001). It Take more than testing.. closing the achievement gap Journal Special Report, Michigan Association of School Board Journal.
- Condition of Education (2000) National Center for Education Statistics: United States Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. NCES 2000-62.
- Haycock, K. (2002) Closing the Achevement Gap. Research For Better Schools Currents. Vol 6.1. Fall/Winter.
- Jencks, C. and Phllips, M. (1998) Closing the black- white achievement gap. The *The American Prospect*. No. 40. pp.44-53.
- Johnston R. and Viadero D. (March 15, 2000) Unmet Promise: Rasing Minority Achievement. *Education Week*.
- Maslow, A. (1968). Toward a psychology of being: Princeton, New Jersey: Van Nostrand.
- Natioanl Assessment of Educational Progress (1999). Long Term Trend Assessment. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Education.
- Orfield, G. (2001) Schools More Separate: Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation.from Harvard University, The Civil Rights Project Web site:
http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/deseg/separate_schools01.php

Figure 1

Dimensions of the Achievement Gap



Grade 5 Reading SOL Results

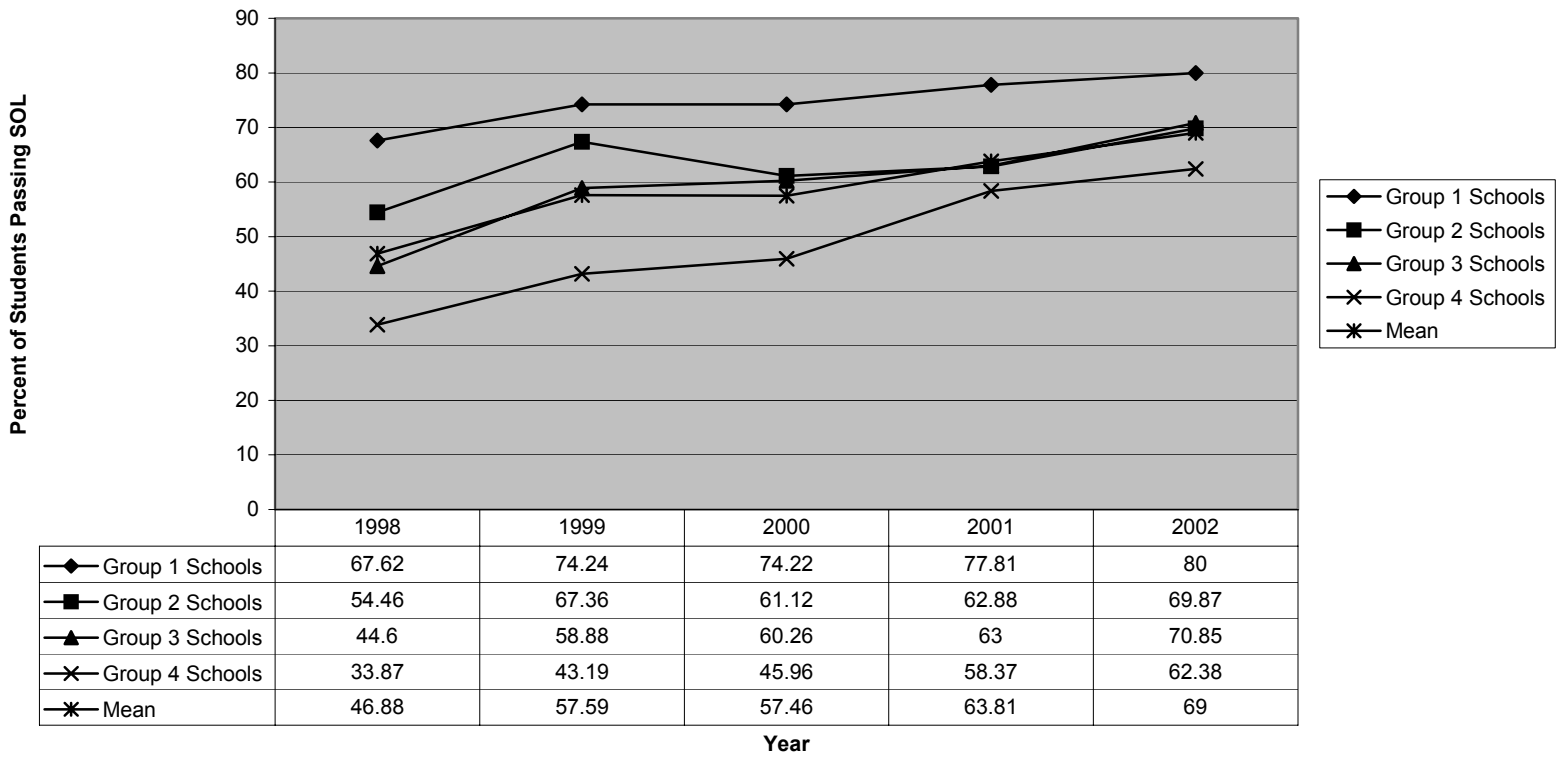


Figure 2

Figure 3

Grade 5 Writing SOL Results

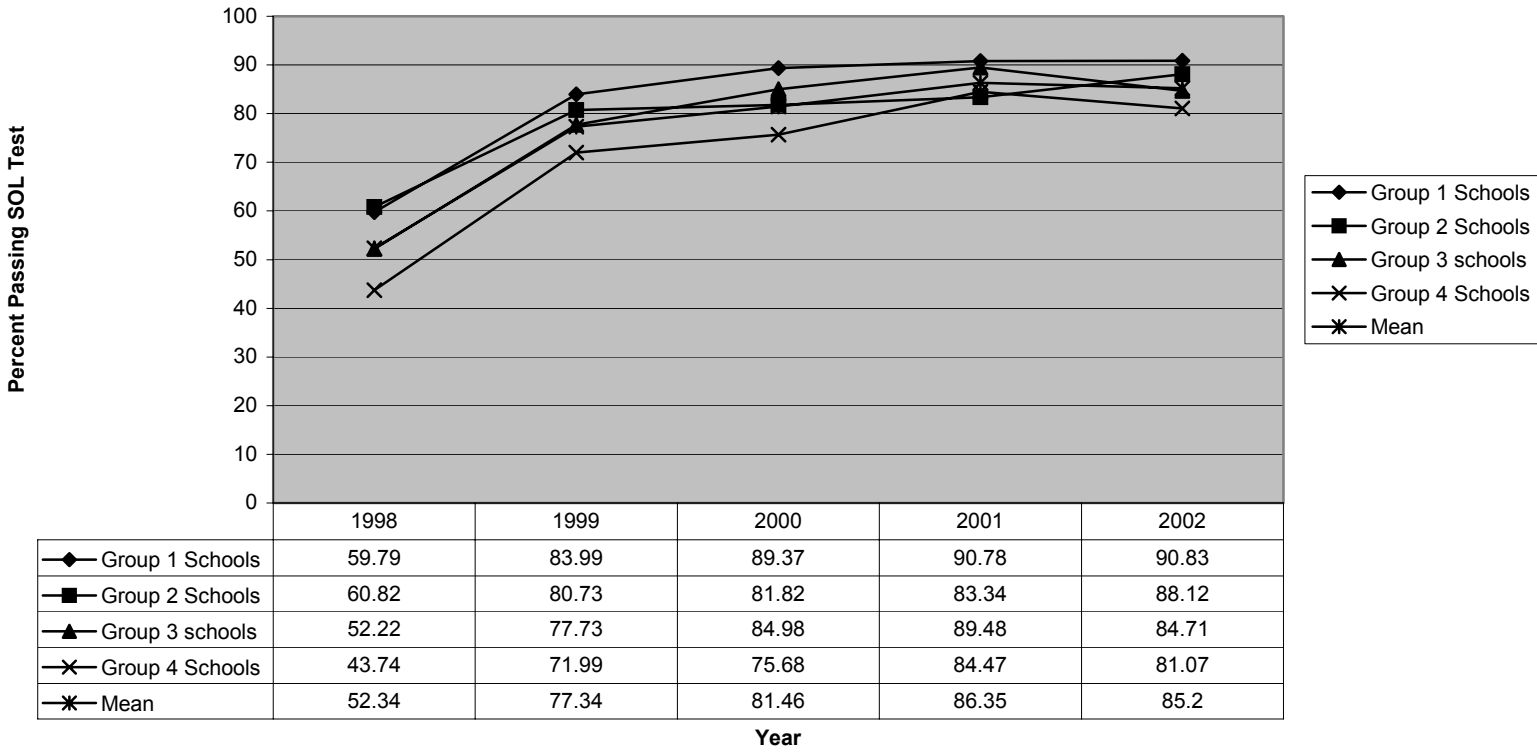


Figure 4

Reading Gap Between Desegregated and Resegregated Schools

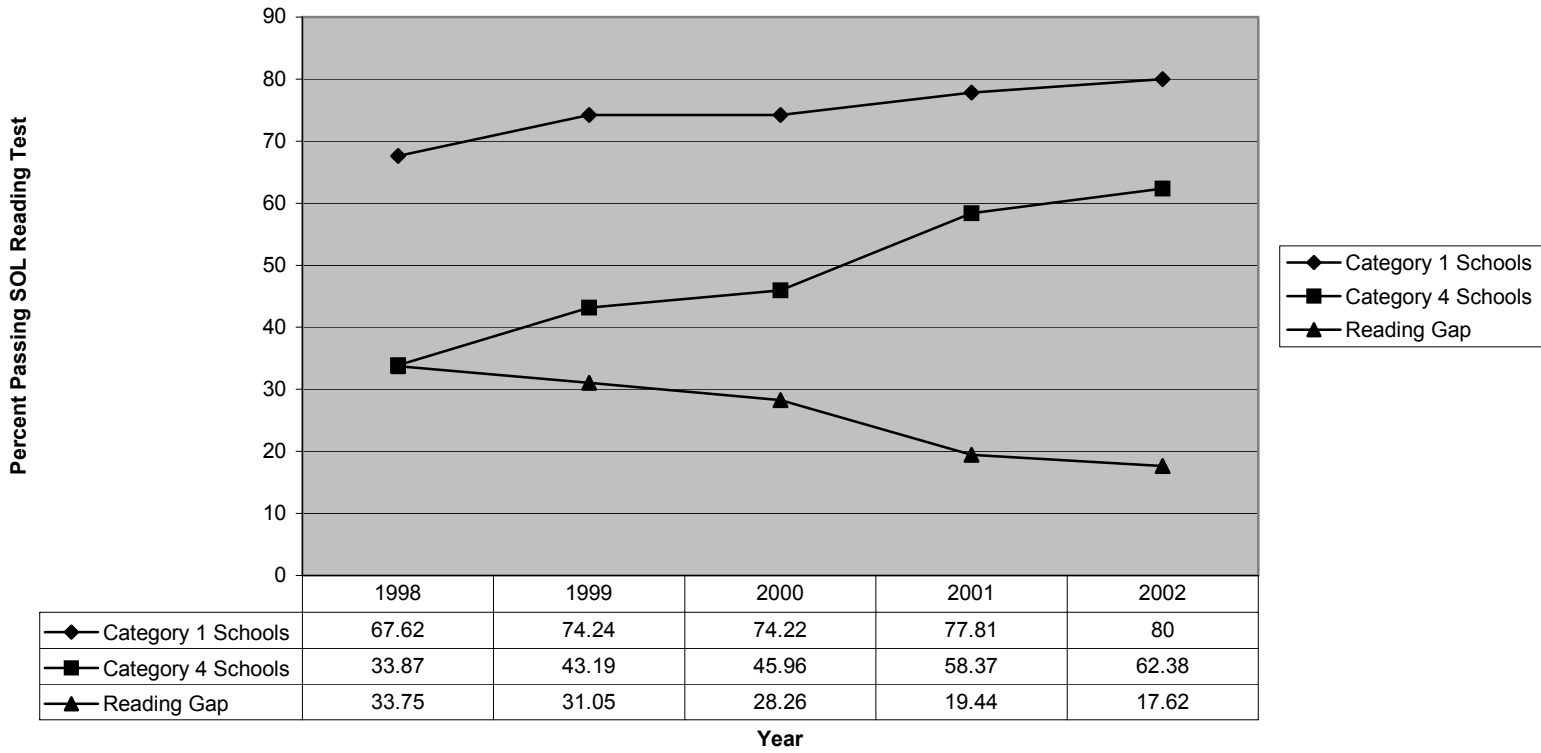


Figure 5

Writing Gap Between Resegregated and Desegregated Schools

